

WORLD: Fate of religious freedom in former USSR, 25 years after its collapse

Commission on International Religious Freedom, State Department provide insight

By Kelsey Dallas

Washington Times (28.12.2016) – <http://bit.ly/2j20sxv> – When the Soviet Union was dissolved on Dec. 26, 1991, the future looked bright for faith groups.

During nearly 70 years of Soviet rule, religious practice had been gradually forced out of public and private life. Faith leaders were sent to labor camps and sacred buildings fell into disrepair.

But 25 years ago, the tide was turning. Newly established constitutions protected religious freedom and sought to create environments where churches and the state could thrive.

Leaders recognized “the positive contribution religion could make to the building of new countries,” said Brian Grim, who worked in what is now Kazakhstan from 1989 until the mid-1990s.

But this optimism soon gave way to paranoia and a protectionist mindset in many post-Soviet nations due to pressure from Orthodox Christian leaders and the rise of religiously motivated terrorism in surrounding countries. Half of the 15 former Soviet countries were called out this year by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for their problematic religious freedom policies.

“Orthodox Christianity views itself very much as the religion of a geographic territory, rather than as a faith of individual people or congregations,” Grim said. Orthodox leaders have become major political players, pushing for policies that can discourage the growth of newer faith groups. In countries like Russia and Uzbekistan, strict registration requirements and other forms of government interference plague religious communities. Officials limit who can own religious buildings and when and where services can be held, said Katayoun Kishi, a research associate at Pew Research Center who oversees the organization’s efforts to track global restrictions on religion.

“It’s sort of an interesting type of state control of religion. It’s not the type of restrictions you see in Iran or Saudi Arabia, where officials seek to promote a specific religion,” she said.

Some countries, especially those with religiously diverse populations, have made notable strides over the last 25 years, encouraging open dialogue between the government and faith groups and supporting religious education, said Grim, president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation. However, the major storyline emerging from this part of the world in the 21st century is growing persecution of religious individuals and institutions.

Below is an overview of the contemporary religious freedom climate in the 15 post-Soviet countries, based primarily on research from USCIRF and the U.S. State Department.

1. *Armenia*

Many faith groups exist in Armenia, which has constitutional religious freedom protections.

However, minority religious communities often languish in the shadow of the Armenian Apostolic Church, according to the U.S. State Department. The AAC is recognized as the national church

of Armenia and plays a key role in cultural identity. More than 9 in 10 Armenians (approximately 92 percent) identify with this faith group.

In December 2015, government leaders passed constitutional amendments that partially corrected this preferential treatment for AAC members, expanding access to conscientious objector status. U.S. State Department officials have also observed growing social acceptance of religious minorities, with members of the media becoming more likely to include the perspective of Jehovah's Witnesses or Muslims in their coverage instead of labeling all minority groups as dangerous sects.

In other words, there are bright spots in Armenia's religious freedom policy, but it's still much easier to be a member of the AAC than any other type of believer.

2. Azerbaijan

More than 95 percent of Azerbaijan's 9.8 million citizens are Muslim, but this religion isn't exempt from government control. "In its effort to prevent the spread of Islamic extremism, the government represses Muslim worship," closing mosques and imprisoning imams, USCIRF reported.

Religious freedom is deteriorating in Azerbaijan as members of minority faith groups increasingly find themselves the targets of discriminatory policies, according to USCIRF. Recent developments, such as the passage of a 2009 law increasing government oversight of religious groups and activities, counter the country's early interest in supporting thriving faith communities.

"Independent, pre-Soviet Azerbaijan (1920-1922) was the world's first Muslim-majority secular parliamentary republic with a good record of respect for religious freedom," USCIRF reported. But the USSR years and subsequent rule by leaders with deep Soviet ties erased the country's early gains in this

area.

Religious groups are required to register with the government and members of minority faiths can be fined or imprisoned for evangelizing in public or advocating for better religious freedom protections, the U.S. State Department reported. Around 50 religious activists were jailed in 2015.

3. *Belarus*

Belarus is roughly the same size as Azerbaijan, but it's much more religiously diverse. "Of Belarus' 9.6 million population, an estimated 68 percent belong to the Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, 15 percent profess no religion and 14 percent are Roman Catholic," USCIRF reported. Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and other Christian groups are also present there.

Belarus is monitored by USCIRF because of its strict regulations governing religious practice. Faith groups and foreign missionaries must register their activities with the government, and most religious expressions are kept out of the public square. Protestant Christians are particularly at risk for fines because they're often viewed as enemies of the state.

Some religious groups practice in secret because they have been denied access to a house of worship or otherwise rejected by registration authorities. Overall, religious practice is closely watched, although some faith leaders report growing opportunities to share their faith in public.

4. *Estonia*

Only around one-third of Estonia's 1.3 million population is religiously affiliated. As in many post-Soviet countries, religious groups are required to register with the government.

But rather than use this information to limit expressions of

faith, government leaders have shown an interest in increasing religious literacy and preventing religiously motivated discrimination and violence by, for example, sponsoring Holocaust education and recognition programs.

In 2015, “the government sponsored educational programs for teachers on best classroom practices for teaching about the Holocaust and consulted with religious groups on such issues as new legislation in response to the refugee crisis in Europe,” the U.S. State Department reported.

5. *Georgia*

The Georgian government is not hostile to religious practice, but policies favor the Georgian Orthodox Church, making it difficult for other religions to flourish.

Like the AAC in Armenia, Georgia’s dominant faith community is viewed as part of the country’s cultural fabric. More than 80 percent of the country’s population belongs to the GOC, and this faith group exclusively provides military chaplains and consults on government policy.

Other religious groups aren’t required to register with the government, but doing so brings benefits like tax exemptions and the right to own property. Members of minority faiths, including Muslims, Roman Catholics and Jehovah’s Witnesses, are sometimes the target of smear campaigns or physical violence, especially when they’re presented as hostile to the Georgian Orthodox Church.

6. *Kazakhstan*

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan emerged as one of the most liberal post-Soviet states in Central Asia. It developed strong ties to the U.S., leaning on the larger country’s insights to help stabilize its surrounding region and improve its economy.

In spite of an ongoing relationship with American leaders, government officials in Kazakhstan have increasingly limited religious practice within their country's borders in recent years, according to USCIRF. They passed a religion law five years ago banning unregistered activity and restricting many aspects of religious life, such as the training of clergy.

"The law's onerous registration requirements have led to a sharp drop in the number of registered religious groups, both Muslim and Protestant," USCIRF leaders noted.

7. *Kyrgyzstan*

USCIRF does not consider Kyrgyzstan to be a country of particular concern, but it may become one soon. In 2015, the country announced potential amendments to its constitution that would increase government oversight of minority religious groups and further privilege Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The amendments would build on a widely condemned 2008 law governing religious practice, which "criminalizes unregistered religious activity and imposes burdensome registration requirements," such as that a new faith group must recruit 200 Kyrgyz residents as founders, USCIRF reported.

These stricter policies likely stem from growing episodes of religiously motivated violence in the region, according to USCIRF. However, religious freedom experts say stronger religious protections, not stricter laws, are the best way to promote safety and discourage radicalization.

8. *Latvia*

The Latvian constitution protects religious freedom for all faiths, but it provides preferential treatment for well-established groups. Only the eight religions deemed "traditional" – Lutherans, Catholics, Latvian Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day

Adventists and Jews – can lead courses in public schools and send representatives to a government advisory council.

Like other countries in the region, Latvia is struggling with how to respond to the recent influx of refugees, many of whom are Muslim. Government leaders have proposed religiously discriminatory policies, such as a ban on face coverings, in the name of national security.

9. *Lithuania*

More than three-quarters of Lithuanians identify as Roman Catholic, but the much smaller Jewish community has been the focus of the government's religious freedom work in recent years.

Government funds have been channeled toward youth camps, educational conferences and other Jewish activities in an effort to atone for Jewish persecution during the Holocaust and counter a recent surge in anti-Jewish sentiment, which has been observed across Europe.

The Jewish community, as well as other well-established religious groups including Lutherans, Muslims and Catholics, has also received government financial support to rebuild religious buildings that fell into disrepair during Nazi and Soviet rule.

The Lithuania Constitution protects the right of citizens to practice whatever religion they choose. However, it differentiates between faith groups that have been present in the country for centuries and those that have only been there for a decade or two, limiting the latter category's ability to officiate weddings or lead courses in schools.

10. *Moldova*

Religious groups of all sizes enjoy governmental protections in Moldova, although the constitution does privilege the

Moldovan Orthodox Church due to its historical significance. Around 86 percent of the country's 3.5 million population identifies with the MOC.

Moldovan law encourages faith groups with more than 100 members to register with the government so that they can hire employees, build churches and buy sections of cemeteries, but it's not required. All religious communities can hold services at public facilities, like hospitals and schools, the U.S. State Department reported.

Moldova has a national antidiscrimination council tasked with investigating incidents of violence or prejudice, including those targeting people of faith. It's a meaningful effort, but it hasn't eliminated distrust of minority faiths, including by Orthodox priests, according to some experts.

11. *Russia*

Russian law includes religious freedom protections such as the right to profess one's faith publicly and prohibitions against faith-based discrimination.

However, starting with the passage of a comprehensive religion law in 1997 that outlined registration requirements, government leaders have shown a willingness to repress religious practice in the name of public safety. Officials from the State Department and USCIRF say the religious freedom climate only stands to get worse.

Russia's anti-extremism law is the crux of the problem, according to USCIRF. It enables officials to label groups as extremist whether or not violence has been conducted in their name. For example, some people have been punished for handing out materials that proclaimed the superiority of their beliefs, USCIRF reported.

Anti-extremism measures also outline when and where proselytism can take place, restricting conversations about

faith online, in homes, or in any location not recognized as a religious building, and enabling officials to closely monitor membership records and weekly meetings.

The measures have affected The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and other religious groups that send missionaries to the country, limiting their work to within church buildings. The LDS Church announced in July that elders and sisters serving there will now be called "volunteers."

12. *Tajikistan*

The post-Soviet period plunged Tajikistan into violence and poverty. To this day, efforts to strengthen religious freedom protections are plagued by government corruption and social distrust.

In 2009, the government passed a series of restrictions on religious practice, increasing the power officials have to punish unpopular faith groups, limit proselytism and oversee the appointment of leaders of the country's largest religious community: Islam.

For these reasons and others, Tajikistan is one of USCIRF's countries of particular concern. Religious freedom advocates are worried that matters only stand to get worse here as religiously motivated violence increases in the region.

"The Tajik government uses concerns over Islamist extremism to justify actions against individuals taking part in certain religious activities," USCIRF reported.

13. *Turkmenistan*

Turkmenistan is largely a closed country, meaning that it promotes policies that limit foreign influence, including from religious leaders or missionaries. Government leaders strive to control most aspects of life, and strict policies governing faith groups allow them to do just that in the area of

religious life.

“The government requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria (and) strictly controls registered groups’ activities,” USCIRF reported. The organization has described Turkmenistan as a country of particular concern since 2000.

Although all faith groups suffer in this environment, religious communities that fail to navigate the registration system are particularly vulnerable. “Unregistered religious groups and unregistered branches of religious groups cannot legally conduct religious activities, including establishing places of worship, gathering for services, producing or disseminating religious materials or proselytizing,” the U.S. State Department reported.

14. *Ukraine*

Religious violence and discrimination in Ukraine have increased in recent years due to conflict with Russia over the region of Crimea. Separatists, or those who support Crimea’s independence from Ukraine, have targeted Protestant Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews and other minority groups.

Russian interference has derailed Ukraine’s efforts to encourage religious tolerance and cooperation. The constitution includes religious freedom protections, but it also requires faith groups to register with the government in order to own property or publish informational tracts.

Registered faith groups are also eligible to receive payouts for damage incurred during Soviet rule, although these funds have been slow in coming. In 2015, “all major religious organizations continued to urge the government to establish a transparent legal process to address restitution claims,” the U.S. State Department reported.

Ukraine is home to the first LDS temple built in a post-Soviet

country, dedicated in Kyiv in August 2010.

15. *Uzbekistan*

This Muslim-majority country has laws protecting religious practice and promoting the separation of church and state, but the country's religious freedom environment falls far short of the ideals laid out in its constitution.

Religious groups are required to register, and officials closely monitor worship services and discourage conversion. "The government imprisons and often subjects to brutal treatment individuals, including an estimated 12,800 Muslims, who do not conform to officially prescribed religious practices," USCIRF reported.

Additionally, minors are banned from religious organizations, laypeople cannot wear religious garb in public and the government can edit printed religious materials.

"Independent human rights groups estimated (in 2015) that between 5,000 and 15,000 individuals remained in prison on charges related to 'religious extremism' or membership in an illegal religious group," the U.S. State Department reported.

It's a bleak situation that explains why Uzbekistan is on USCIRF's list of countries of particular concern.

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